

FAIRPORT MUNICIPAL COMMISSION

Part two of three

The 1950's and 60's saw a tremendous increase in Perinton's population as suburban subdivisions replaced farmland. All the new developments needed electricity and Fairport Electric responded. Changes were made in the way that electricity was produced and distributed. The village plant was expanded in 1950. A substation on Turk Hill Road, later to be named for Vincent Lawler, a long-term member of the Municipal Commission, was opened in 1952, providing five new circuits. By 1959, the state Public Service Commission franchise that had been granted to the Fairport Municipal Commission covered an area of approximately 27 square miles, including all of Fairport village and most of Perinton.

During the 1960's and into the 1970's, as the community grew, Fairport Electric continued to ask for and receive additional power from the Power Authority. In the early 1970's, however, requests for more power were suddenly denied as the Power Authority claimed that the power had already been sold elsewhere. Municipal electric companies were facing their first crisis and the first of a series of challenges to their promised allotment of 50% of the hydropower output from the Niagara projects. As Robert Vaisey, who was Fairport's General Manager at the time, said, "If we don't have preferential power and are put at the mercy of private utilities, we'll go out of business." Fortunately, Fairport Electric and its fellow municipal utilities kept their preferential status. These crises, however, and the publicity that accompanied them served to raise the community's awareness of the value of its municipal electric company.

The 1980's saw allotments and preferential treatment continue to be an issue. Although the courts found that the municipals were not entitled to as much power as they had previously been awarded, they continued to receive significant amounts of power from the hydroelectric generating stations. However, due to the greatly increased demand over and above the hydropower allotment, electricity had to be bought on the open market at substantially higher prices. As a result, there were two rate hikes in the 1980's, a 10% increase in 1981, and a 12-13% increase in 1987. At the time, with the increase, the rates were about 40% of those paid by customers of Rochester Gas & Electric.

In the wake of the challenges of the 1970's and the greatly increased demand, Fairport and other public power communities in the nation initiated a "Public Power Week" to spotlight the special characteristics and unique benefits of public power in 1987. The celebration helped the community to realize that cheap electricity comes not only because of the availability of hydropower, but also because Fairport Electric has not-for-profit status, and is small and well-managed. The result is good service not only to individual customers, but also to the community as a whole.

"Fairport Electric was a major consideration in our decision to locate a major facility in Perinton...." "...your people demonstrate a true concern for the satisfaction of their customers." "The favorable electric rates help us to maintain savings in a marketplace that continues to be extremely competitive." Testimonials such as these are clear evidence of the impact that Fairport Electric has had on the economic growth of the community. The municipal commission has also received special grants of low-cost electricity for several local businesses, which is in line with New York's policy of encouraging businesses to remain in the state. Further it is not uncommon to read real estate ads that tout the fact that a property is served by Fairport Electric, whose rates are about one-third less than those of the Commission's major competitor.

Not only do customers appreciate the low rates, but they also benefit from excellent service. At no time are people more aware of their service than during storms or other power emergencies. Hurricane Hazel in 1954 only caused a 15 minute total outage and all power was restored within two days. During the great Northeast blackout of 1966, Fairport was one of very few communities that still had power, despite the fact that the Commission was only receiving half of its usual allotment. Given the area's climate, the commission regularly dealt with snow and ice storm damage. Notable events were the ice storms of 1991 and 2003, both of which did over one million dollars worth of damage, the Labor Day storm of 1998 which destroyed many, many trees and took down over twenty electric poles, and the blizzard of 1999 which closed down the area for several days. One of the main problems with any storm is that most utility lines in Perinton are above ground and are subject to entanglement with any and all downed trees. In addition, in several subdivisions the poles are behind the houses, causing more difficulty. Crews work around the clock during these times to restore power as quickly as possible.

Mutual aid is a common practice. Many crews came to Fairport's aid after the 1991 ice storm. In 1997 workers came from Bath, Wellsville, Spencerport, Salamanca, and Plattsburg, among others. Fairport crews were in turn sent to Rouse's Point and Plattsburg later in that same season to aid in an ice storm cleanup. Feeding and housing not only the local workers but also the out-of-town ones becomes a job in itself during those times. In 1998 and 2003, many crews were fed at the Town Hall as well as at other local restaurants.

Fairport Electric has around forty employees working with Supervisor Mitch Wilke, who has been with the organization for over thirty years. All workers undergo significant training. The Municipal Electric Utilities Association of New York organizes training for several levels of line worker proficiency, as well as training related to safety. For example, apprentice line workers attend four-day training sessions over the course of a year. The training includes lectures, demonstrations, and hands-on experience in such areas as utility pole climbing and the handling of high-voltage repairs.

To be continued